

The Dissolution of Religion: Healing in Unification Church and Public Welfare in Japan

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*I have adhered to the Honor Code for this assignment. - Satoru Uchida*

The Tokyo District Court ordered the dissolution of the Family Federation, formally known as the Unification Church (the Church), on March 25, 2025. This is a concerning decision regarding the Freedom of Religion and religious activities under the Constitution of Japan, Article 20. Regarding the details of the legal violations within the ruling summary, the Tokyo District Court stated that the Church has involved “Across the country, believers targeted people experiencing hardship, including complex family environments, persuading them that donations were required to solve their issues. They then induced these individuals to repeatedly make donations to the point where it seriously jeopardized the financial stability of the donors or their close relatives to maintain their livelihoods.” As of today, only two cases are out there where dissolution orders were sought under Article 81, Paragraph 1 (i) of the Religious Corporations Act<sup>1</sup>, including Aum Shinrikyo<sup>2</sup> and the Religious Corporation Myokakuji (宗教法人明覚寺).<sup>3</sup> The dissolution request for Aum Shinrikyo was based on acts of terrorism, and for the religious corporation Myokakuji, it was based on fraud regarding mizuko (水子) and an indictment by the local investigation offices, in which Myokakuji was found guilty. Concerning the dissolution order against the Family Federation, the Tokyo District Court determined that its recruitment and soliciting donations fell under the category of acts “in violation of laws and regulations, ... which is clearly found to harm public welfare substantially.” Unification Church as a religious corporation has not committed terrorism or been indicted and found guilty of fraudulent business, as found in the earlier two cases, despite several civil action cases the Church lost and compensated.<sup>4</sup> However, since the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the

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<sup>1</sup> Article 81 (1) “When the court finds that a cause which falls under any of the following items exists with regard to a religious corporation, it may order the dissolution of the religious corporation at the request of the competent authority, an interested person, or a public prosecutor, and by its own authority: (i) in violation of laws and regulations, the religious corporation commits an act which is clearly found to harm public welfare substantially;”

<sup>2</sup> *Request to Revoke Surveillance Action* (Tokyo District Court 2001).

<sup>3</sup> *Meeting Minutes of the 143rd Council of Religious Corporation*. Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Japan. [https://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/shingi/shuukyo/gijiroku/1329787.htm](https://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/shuukyo/gijiroku/1329787.htm).

<sup>4</sup> *Claiming Damages*, 48 (Niigata District Court 2002).

questionable nature of the Church has become a political topic. The more public and political interests the Church attracts, the case filed by the Japanese government to dissolve the Church became more outstanding and more urgent for social stability and religious freedom.<sup>5</sup> The Unification Movement, the greater movement initiated by Reverend Sun Myung Moon (문선명/文鮮明), includes biomedical support, such as running a hospital and providing medical support for high-demand areas. The Unification Movement is rather purveying biomedicine to save more lives. Nevertheless, controversies arose about their belief regarding healing and its practice, which forces them to donate a huge amount of money. If the healing practices of the Unification Movement are a spiritual fraud, as Myokakuji did, then the Family Federation deserves dissolution. If it is not, dissolution is questionable. The paper will first examine the scholarly works published by Unification Theological Seminary<sup>6</sup>, suggesting their holistic view of health, examining the Unificationists' concept of healing. Next, focusing on the case of Akemi Nagatomo (長友 明美), who overcame cervical cancer that she was diagnosed with during missionary service. Finally, the comparison to other religious groups that practice medical healing will provide insight into the Unification Movement within Japanese society. In the end, I will return to the question of whether the Family Federation committed either fatal or spiritual fraud or provided another form of integrated medical practice.

The Journal of Unification Studies has published several articles about spirituality and healing.<sup>7</sup> The notable one is the essay depicting the healing journey of the author, Ute Delaney.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation). "2 Years Have Passed Since the Shooting of Former PM Abe." Accessed May 16, 2025. July 8, 2024. <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20240708/k10014505081000.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Currently known as HJ International Graduate School for Peace and Public Leadership. Visit their website for further information. <https://www.hji.edu/institutional-name-change-faq/>

<sup>7</sup> For example: Brinkley, Dannion. "Multidimensional Reality." *Journal of Unification Studies* Vol 17, (2016): 177–194; Kone, Drissa. "A Transformative Approach to Conflict and Violence." *Journal of Unification Studies* Vol 24, (2023): 1–16; Williams, John R. "A Unificationist Perspective on Masturbation." *Journal of Unification Studies* 21, (2020): 121–148.

<sup>8</sup> Delaney, Ute. "Healing and Spirituality." *Journal of Unification Studies* 12, (2011): 181–194.

Ute, based on her experience, discusses the importance of spirituality when one faces a physical illness. The essay gives us insights into Unificationists' understanding of the physical body and its healing. Ute noted, "the body became an enemy" due to early philosophies such as Manichaeism and Gnosticism internalized in modern Christianity. Instead, the Divine Principle provided Ute a holistic idea of physical body - "Human beings are created with a body, that is the external form, and a mind, that is the internal character. Only by having harmonious give and take action between these parts, humans can become perfect objects of God." She also distinguishes between heal and cure - healing is internal, cure is external. She discusses that Western medicine cannot heal patients' souls or spirits, and it is one reason why we suffer from illness. Another reason is the demon possession of the human mind due to a weak soul. Both have something to do with the soul, and she claims this is why spiritual healing matters. It is worth noting that she also mentioned the limit of its efficacy. She implied that God has multiple pathways to communicate with human beings, and humans are incapable of predicting what will initiate God's miracles. Ute further discuss spirituality and healing procedures. Before diving into the discussion, she defined spirituality as "any practice that will lead us to be closer to God." The frequent referring to other traditions, such as Korean shamanism and the New Age, reflects Unificationists' characteristic view towards spirituality, saying, "God works in mysterious ways." As the name of the movement implies, followers of the Unification Church believe spiritual and physical health are deeply intertwined and there is no distinctive boundary between spiritual healing and biomedical cure. Ute concluded her essay, saying, "not divide the person up in two beings, one to be dealt with boldly, and one to be dealt with spiritually."

Ute introduced various ideas unique to Unificationists, the followers of the Church. They will consider biomedicine as incapable of healing, and healing comes from God through spiritual

experiences. Any spiritual tradition, from shamanism to New Age movements, could be an authentic way to receive healing since God will not stick to one closed channel. In contrast to her bold statement, she chose to fly to Korea and received healing at Chung Pyung, based on “authorized” Dae Mo Nim’s style. She justified herself, claiming “we as Unificationists are afraid of non-authorized spirituality.” If so, who will find the new “authorized” spiritual practices that are available to local populations? Not everyone has the financial capability to receive the treatment abroad. The Church’s theory technically opens a door to alternative spiritualities, but in reality, as Ute did, there are the Church-affiliated facilities that suit the Church’s logic. Healing resides within the sphere of the Church’s influence. It will keep followers within the narrative of the Church, making “donations to the point where it seriously jeopardized the financial stability of the donors or their close relatives to maintain their livelihoods” based on the dissolution order. Yet the boundary of the sphere is hard to recognize from the outside, because the sphere is filled with the Church-affiliated groups, not the Church itself. Moreover, those groups tend to borrow local traditions or widely recognized ideas, as Ute treated shamanism and New Age equal to Christian traditions. The Church often uses the public medium to spread the word about itself, without disclosing who they are.

The TV station in Japan broadcasted a documentary show nationally. It was about the miraculous story of Akemi Nagatomo giving birth to the twins, overcoming her cervical cancer.<sup>9</sup> Her cervical cancer occurred due to the maltreatment after the stillbirth she experienced during the mission to Freetown, Sierra Leone. She first received chemotherapy in New York, but she wrote, “I was feared. Chemotherapy may kill cancer, along with me. Death was sitting next to me.”<sup>10</sup> Then she came across to know that a hospital in Tokyo that provides a different approach

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<sup>9</sup> Akemi, Nagatomo. "Autobiography of the woman who gave birth to the twins after the terminal cervical cancer." *Chishiki* 1, no. 41 (May, 1985): 255–271. doi:10.11501/1795376.

<sup>10</sup> Translated by Author. All translation is done by author otherwise noted.

to curing cancer. The hospital is Isshin Hospital, run by a subsidiary of the Unification Church.<sup>11</sup> Dr. Amabayashi, the doctor in charge of her, first told her to believe “cancer will go away.” She interpreted the word in a spiritual way. Quoting the Bible, she noted, “The fight with cancer is the spiritual fight. Thus, the praying by many brothers and sisters encouraged me to stand still.” The healing method against cancer at Isshin Hospital, based on her essay, is worth noting. She recorded that the hospital provides more than twelve practices, including mainstream methods such as chemotherapy or radiotherapy, and alternative methods, namely “heat therapy,” “psychological therapy,” “Chinese and Korean traditional medicine therapy,” and “dietary therapy.” She called it a holistic approach, but the weight given to the alternative methods, especially the “psychological” method, illustrates the Hospital’s emphasis on the role of patients’ spirituality and faith over the healing and curing processes. One recommendation from Dr. Amabayashi reflects their emphasis on a psychological approach. Dr. Amabayashi encouraged patients “to pursue why cancer emerged in your body.” She insists that she ‘learned’ cancer is deeply tied to not only the lifestyles or diets but also the personality and life experiences, linking the patient’s body and mind. She even believed cancer patients have shared characteristics in common, and worked to reshape her personality not to include such. As she realized the ‘spiritual law of the world,’ she strengthened the idea that the “illness and other things that happened to me are the path to deepen the relationship to God one step further.” She concluded that the curing of cancer comes from “greater comprehension of the sake of God and experiencing the hope, love, and happiness which God is eager to give human beings.”

Her idea does not represent the Church, yet it is too close to the Church’s teachings about healing. Her autobiography proposes a few ideas. First of all, the active engagement with the

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<sup>11</sup> Kiyomi, Tsujimoto. *Memorandum of the Question*.  
<https://www.sangiin.go.jp/japanese/joho1/kousei/syuisyo/210/syuh/s210056.htm>.

Church's ideas by medical personnel. It illustrates the invisibility of the Church's influence in society. Isshin Hospital is open to the public, and of course, all medical professionals are licensed by the Japanese government. However, the therapy they provided and their communication with Akemi showed underlying Unificationism. They did provide biomedical treatment, but it was also religious healing. Akemi's understanding of cancer is also interesting. She repeatedly depicted cancer as something curable by cooperating with her spiritual and psychological aspects. It supports Ute's idea that the illness is a result of an imbalanced mind and body. Healing is from God, and the Church provides followers the "authentic" way to reach out to God. Within the Church-affiliated sphere, biomedical treatment is also religious.

There are other relatively new religions presenting their religiosity within the healthcare systems in modern Japan. Tenrikyo (天理教) and Rissyo Ko-Sei Kai (立正佼成会) are one of them. The vital difference to Isshin Hospital is the clear distinction between spiritual care and medical care. The Tenri Yorozu Sodansho (天理よろづ相談所), the hospital with over 700 beds, has an office named Jijyobu (事情部). Jijyobu hosts about 100 Tenri teachers (事情部教師) from Tenri Churches around Japan temporarily. They are religious person, but open to working for non-believers. The research suggests that some teachers believe their spiritual job might affect the patients' health, while others believe their duty is relieving the patients' suffering. Those teachers do not work with medical professionals except in an emergency. The researcher called it "division over mutual trust." The teachers solely provide spiritual care to patients who need it, and medical teams provide biomedical treatment.<sup>12</sup> Rissyo Ko-Sei Kai also takes a similar approach but in a more secular way. They run the Institution of Ko-Sei Counseling (佼成カウンセリング研究所) that provides a four-year free training of spiritual care with a widely used

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<sup>12</sup> Morita et al. *What a Religionist can do at a Hospital: the variety of care for non-believers*. Ryūkoku Sōsho; 58. First ed. Tōkyō: Keiso Shobo, 2022: 139-175.

curriculum for counselors' training. The training is open to everyone regardless of their faith or affiliation. The Institution focuses on the importance of “listening” (Keicyo / 傾聴). “Listening” does not carry explicitly religious meanings. The role of “listener” (Keityo-sha / 傾聴者) is not explicitly religious as well. Those who completed the course receive the certification of Spiritual Care Worker (kokoro no so-dan in / 心の相談員) and are able to work at the Institution and Ko-Sei Hospital (佼成病院). Ko-Sei Hospital has been working with a private medical school, which is unaffiliated with the Rissyo Ko-Sei Kai, which makes the hospital a mostly secular space. Ko-Sei Hospital invites Spiritual Care Workers to its terminal care. At the hospital, listeners visit patients staying at a terminal care ward about once a week and pay attention to what patients talk to them, and they are independent from the medical team. Medical teams aim to minimize the physical pain, and Spiritual Care Workers listen to the patients’ psychological sufferings amid the fear of the end of life.<sup>13</sup> Researchers assumed that the clear distinction between medical and spiritual care teams in those two cases has two reasons. First of all, due to the legal restrictions that protect patients’ privacy, doctors cannot talk much about patients to non-medical personnel. In addition, the bed is usually filled with non-believers. To support patients from diverse religious backgrounds with varied religiosity, trained professionals are required. Most importantly, the medical professionals of the two hospitals were mostly secular. It draws a line between the patients’ minds, which patients can access, and their bodies, which only doctors can operate on. Medical advice or treatment and religious support are different. Isshin Hospital also mainly deals with non-believers, but they do not have a dedicated office for spiritual counselors.<sup>14</sup> Instead, medical professionals are actively engaging with Unificationist ideas. It blurs the Unificationist’s view of the Church-affiliated hospitals. This active engagement

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<sup>13</sup> Morita et al., 177-207.

<sup>14</sup> "Isshin Hospital." Accessed April 20, 2025. <https://isshein.net/>.



by medical staff might be challenging for patients, particularly non-followers, to distinguish between medical advice and religious words on illness and healing. While it is possible to argue that Isshin Hospital provides religious healing based on the Church's teaching, mostly within the socially accepted biomedicine, it could influence the patient's knowledge and decision-making without knowing that the set of knowledge patients received is based on the Church's teachings. It may potentially harm the patients' right to be informed.

With the focus on Isshin Hospital, it was clear that they took a slightly different view and approach towards healing compared to other new religious movements. For Church members, spiritual healing is a part of the whole healing process, as is modern medicine. Their belief decreased modern medicine into an imperfect healing method since it will not solve spiritual damage, which will eventually cause physical illnesses again. Then, purely spiritual healing rituals might have an efficacy in removing physical illnesses, which opens the possibility of the Church leaders and members serving as medical professionals through spiritual knowledge. Return to Akemi's case, doctors and nurses referred to her as "a woman having true faith."<sup>15</sup> Faith was a part of the biomedical procedure. Doctors at Isshin Hospital are not just experts in the human body, but also experienced in enhancing spiritual relationships with God. This spiritual medical treatment is based on the Unificationists' belief. In a way, there is a similarity to the Myokakuji. The key difference is that Unificationists believe biomedicine is also necessary. The mixed nature of Unificationism struggles society to decide whether their view of healing is acceptable or not.

The question of whether the Family Federation is involved in a spiritual fraud under the name of healing, as Myokakuji did, is complex. It is reasonable to assume the Tokyo District Court concluded without fully capturing the multifaceted nature of the case and the Church. This

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<sup>15</sup> Nagatomo, 261.

paper argued that Unification Church has constructed a distinct approach to healing by establishing its affiliated medical institutions, such as Isshin Hospital, with Unificationistic practices that challenge publicly defined understandings of both medical and religious fields. Shreds of evidence, including Unificationist theology, holistic practices at Isshin Hospital, and comparisons with Tenrikyo and Rissyo Ko-Sei Kai, suggest that the Church does not wholly reject biomedicine and recommends spiritual treatments as Myokakuji did. Nevertheless, the Church's implicit ideas on the spiritual root of physical illness and the efficacy of spiritual interventions, especially those "authorized by the Church" methods, create a system where financial contributions and obligations to the Church could become entangled with perceived healing essentials to patients, reiterating the concerns mentioned in the order by the Tokyo District Court. Eventually, the ongoing case of the Family Federation and its approach to healing compels a total re-examination of how legal frameworks differentiate between legitimate spiritual support under the freedom of religion and fraudulent practices that overly pressure vulnerable individuals. The integration of biomedicine and spiritual healing may distinguish it from the Myokakuji spiritual fraud case. Despite their cooperative attitude towards biomedicine, the prevalent emphasis on spiritual causes for illness and the Church-affiliated pathways to healing, especially when the healing requires financial donations as implied by the court order, highlights the profound challenges in regulating religious groups that operate at the complex crossing of faith, health, and business. This situation emphasizes the difficulty in protecting both religious freedom and public welfare when a religious group's activities blur the line between spiritual support and potentially dubious practices in the context of healthcare. Thus, the dissolution order may imply not just a judgment on past suspicious activities, but an ongoing societal, political, and legal struggle to define the acceptable boundaries of religious influence in

the highly political but private domain of illness and healing in contemporary Japan. In the end, Unificationists' practices, deeply embedded in the Church's healing practices that intertwine spiritual and physical health, which sometimes require recurring financial donations, appear to be fraudulent from a certain view, and fully religious at the same time. Thus, the dissolution order, reflecting the characteristic of ambiguity, is justifiable as much as it is unacceptable from different perspectives. (2822 words)

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